

Dream Job or Ordinary Work: Understandings of Creativity and Work in Creative Industries

Television & New Media

1–16

© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/15274764251334578

journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn

Anne O' Brien¹  and Sarah Arnold¹

Abstract

This paper examines how early career workers in Irish Creative Industries perceive creativity in relation to their work experiences. Based on a survey of twenty workers in media, digital, marketing, and social media roles, the findings show workers did not claim creative identities nor see their jobs as creative. Instead they associate creative workplaces with constraints, and with quite “ordinary” and hard work. Nonetheless, they operationalized an idea of creativity and listed creative fulfilment and recognition as rewards for their work. This finding is significant because it departs from accounts of the attraction of creative work as intrinsically tied to questions of identity and rather points to an ideology of the creative as a key attractor for current new entrants, who privilege an ideal notion of creative work even despite their own material experiences that contradict that ideal.

Keywords

creativity, creative industries, work, employment, early career

Introduction

This paper examines how early career workers in Ireland articulate their understanding of creativity and how that relates to their framing of their lived experience of creative work. Creative Industries (CIs) have most frequently been examined through a socio-cultural construction of creative work, where it is understood that social factors,

¹Maynooth University, Ireland

Corresponding Author:

Anne O' Brien, Department of Media Studies, Maynooth University, Room 2.109, Callan Building, Maynooth, Ireland.

Email: anne.obrien@mu.ie

cultural contexts, and assessments influence creativity (Andersen 2022; Gielen 2013; Siciliano 2021). However, this work has not extensively explored how creativity is experienced or understood by creative workers, and particularly those in the early stages of their working lives. This paper aims to explore that gap through a small-scale, qualitative, case study of twenty early career workers in Irish CIs, which includes both Audiovisual and Digital Creative Industries (Creative Ireland 2018, 2023). The paper explores firstly the ways in which workers see their jobs or work as creative, and secondly how these workers locate creativity in their working lives or how they define their own creativity. The key findings propose that creative workers were slow to define their everyday work as creative, despite their jobs being explicitly located within creative industries. There was a disjuncture for participants between how they understood creativity in the abstract and how they experienced creativity in the “concrete” lived realities of their own “creative” work. Their work experiences were associated with constraint, where creativity was framed as hard work and their experiences were quite “ordinary.” The paper further notes however that despite their struggles with the “un-creative” aspects of their work, participants nonetheless reverted to the ideal of the creative when listing the rewards accrued from their work, which included creative fulfilment and recognition. They valued creativity very highly and offered complex and multi-faceted articulations of what creativity meant to them. Creativity was not something they claimed to “be” nor was it perceived as an intrinsic quality, rather it was something quite nebulous and context dependent. In short, participants were articulate in terms of what they meant by creativity, but did not use the concept to describe their everyday work practices, however they still saw specifically creative outcomes as key benefits from their work. This finding is significant because it adds to, but also departs from, accounts of creative work as intrinsically tied to questions of identity construction (Gill 2011; McRobbie 2016). The ideology of the creative is a key attractor for current new entrants, who do not foreground their identities as creatives as the main rationale for getting into CIs, but rather they privilege an ideal notion of creative work, even despite their own material experiences, which contradict that ideal. In sum, the paper highlights that experiences of creative work are not always justified in terms of identity, workers admit to the ordinariness of much of their work, but they do gloss over material realities to profess faith in the idea of creative work as ultimately fulfilling.

Literature Review

The CIs are often discussed in media and policy debates where they are usually defined primarily as subsectors of the economy. Irish CIs are vaguely defined, and entangle cultural with creative sectors (Houses of the Oireachtas 2017). They were first discussed in policy in 2008 where they were positioned as vehicles for economic growth (Department of An Taoiseach 2008). Roughly 50,000 people are employed in Irish CIs, about three percent of total employment (Crowley 2017), with film and television, one of the largest CI sectors, supporting nearly 15,000 full-time jobs (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht 2016). In the Irish context, CIs are entangled with

audiovisual and digital CIs, which include UX/UI, social media, games, content creation, marketing and branding. Because of its small scale Irish CI sectors are heavily networked and precarious working patterns are evident (Arnold & O' Brien, 2023). Nonetheless work in the CIs is highly attractive to young people (O' Brien et al., 2021). The marketization of higher education has resulted in an expansion of degree programs in CIs and state supports for training (Cultural and Creative Skillnet 2024). Research has also addressed CIs as a particular form and experience of work, however, there is limited Irish research on what is meant by creativity within CIs or on how workers experience and understanding creativity in their work.

For Stahl, good creative work constitutes not only the practices of creative freedom and avoidance of dissatisfaction and alienation, but also involves exchange of property rights and the transfer of control, as well as constituting a space from which to critique the character of work itself (in Banks et al. 2013). However, much of the CIs literature documents how these ideals fail to materialize in creative work. The sector can be understood to be characterized by a prevalence of what Hesmondalgh and Baker (2011) describe as “bad work,” which they outline in terms of workers’ “control by or dependence on others” and “frustrated self-realization” (p. 36). McRobbie (1998), proposed that despite these conditions, creative work remains attractive because it is a means of constructing identity, an “expressive extension of self” (p. 6). It is the desire for self-actualization that renders creative workers vulnerable to self-exploitation and to disappointment and self-blame when the utopian thread implicit in creative work does not materialize (McRobbie 2002, 53). Gill (2011) similarly connects creative work with the project of identity-construction under contemporary conditions of neo-liberal capitalism and with increasingly insecure, casualized and intermittent employment patterns. Even in scholarship that recuperates the agency of creative workers—where they work with, manipulate and negotiate the constraints of work (Bilton et al. 2021)—workers are nonetheless in a dependent relationship rather than a reciprocal one, for example, their creativity versus the Creative Industry. Creativity, in such studies, is presented as an internal, personal feature of the worker, as part of their identity. While we accept these broad categorizations of the socio-political context of creative work and that at times the project of identity-construction accounts for the ongoing supply of entrants to CIs, we argue that a recent cohort of new entrants do not articulate identity as a reason for undertaking creative work. Instead, they operationalize the idea of the inherent value of the “creative” as their reason for getting into and staying in creative work, despite their own material experiences of the work as quite ordinary and mundane. In short, new entrants are not attracted only by identity construction, the idea of “being creative,” but also by the ideal of the creative as being inherently positive. Rather than it defining who they are, “creative” is a powerful ideal that they attach to their work, even when their work is materially ordinary.

In attempting to unpack the power of the ideal of the “creative,” literature that centrally concerns itself with creativity as a phenomenon notes that it can be understood in diverse ways. Many researchers emphasize a multifactorial explanation of creativity as something that arises through a variety of contexts, processes, and practices (Csikszentmihalyi 1988). Andersen (2022) usefully summarizes key

theorizations of creativity according to five contemporary traditions, the individualistic, socio-cultural, pragmatic, social constructivist, and artistic.

The individualist tradition sees psychologists initially link creativity to the capacity for divergent thinking (Guilford 1950) and later to originality or usefulness (Runco and Jaeger 2012). However, “other psychologists have tried to debunk the romantic myth about the creative genius” and pointed out how this tradition ultimately fails to explain how creativity connects to individual genius (Andersen 2022, 12). A second sociocultural tradition proposed that explanations of creativity needed to incorporate social interactions or context in assessments (Amabile 1983; Csikszentmihalyi 1988). However, as Andersen notes, this model too is limited because it remains a generic descriptive rather than explanatory model (2022, 16). Nonetheless it does set out a shift in thinking that sees creativity as the result of the interaction of both individual agency with social structures.

Andersen notes a third, pragmatic tradition in theorizing creativity, which works from the dominant, pragmatic philosophical position adopted in design and uses the concept of constraint to understand how creativity is limited and enhanced (2022, 19). The pragmatic approach however fails to critically engage with the social conditions or challenges to individuals in engaging with creative processes. This absence is addressed more effectively in the last two approaches, the Artistic and Social Constructivist traditions. Taylor and Littleton (2012) and Banks (2017) incorporate social, narrative and discursive psychology perspectives on creatives, to explore the entanglement of creativity and identity.

Taylor and Littleton (2012) “assume a complex subject-in-the making, positioned within multiple contexts and actively interpreting the available, sometimes conflicting, and affect-laden meanings attached to creative work” (p. 29). Banks (2007) frames workers’ choices to work in CIs, despite governmentality and conditions, as an ideological rejection of capitalism. However Banks does not centrally pose the question of what workers mean when they describe creativity and whether or not they see it reflected in their work practices. Siciliano very engagingly addresses similar questions and finds that workers’ understandings of creativity are varied, drawing on romantic and universalizing discourses of autonomy and “godlike power, often ignoring their actual social dependence” (2021, 30) with workers’ accounts of creativity revolving around tasks performed during the working day (2021, 31). McRobbie (2016) argues that creativity is a “dispositif” where CIs rely on dispositions of workers, acquired through education programs that function as vectors to invite workers to “be creative”. The dispositif negates the need for external control of workers because their disposition functions ideologically to shape their entire approach to CIs by having them identify as creatives.

The description of creativity that is operationalized in this study, accepts that it is often a powerful discourse that permeates workers’ sense of their identities and subjectivities but we also point to a category of new entrant who does not so saliently argue for creativity as part of their identity, but rather argues for creativity as an ideal, a worthy pursuit, even despite the fact that their actual work in CIs is often mundane and ordinary. Identity is one way in which the creative constructs subjectivities as CI

workers but there also seems to be an ideological dimension to CIs where the idea of work as creative overrides experiences of it as ordinary. As Taylor (2023) has noted, positive associations and ideas about creativity from psychology and the arts blind workers to the difficulties they face (p. 9). While most CIs literature argues that self-exploitation is a trade-off in return for self-actualization what we find in this study is a cohort of workers less interested in the idea of self-actualization or identity and more inclined to justify their participation in CIs on the basis, perhaps blindly, of creativity as an inherent good, an idea most likely as Taylor (2023) notes, derived from popular and political discourses based in psychology. We propose that this shift (back) toward the ideology of the creative is a new and additional way in which to understand why workers enter CIs, but one that departs from the idea that new entrant workers still construct their identities around their creative work. Workers in this study do not foreground their identities as creatives as the primary justification for participating in CIs, nor do they prioritize the material experience of the work itself, rather the ideal of the creative is what seems to matter to current new entrants to CIs.

Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative approach in order to “explore and understand the meaning” that groups ascribe to work in the CIs (Creswell 2014, 4). An explanatory case study approach was used (Yin 2014) to understand how early-career creative workers understood creativity and work in the real-life context of their lived experience of work in Irish CIs. The case study was intrinsic as it sought “not to understand or test abstract theory or to develop new theoretical explanations” instead, the intention was to better understand intrinsic aspects of creativity and work in the context of Irish CIs (Berg 2004, 229). Cases were selected for study on the basis that they were as similar as possible, so all were new entrants in Irish CIs. A purposive sample of cases was derived from a population of graduates from media and cultural studies degree programs at an Irish institution, who all graduated in 2020–21 so contextual differences were minimized.

Data collection was done using a qualitative survey instrument. The survey contained open-ended questions about how the workers defined creativity, what attracted them to working in CIs, whether or not getting work in CIs meet their expectations, whether they defined their current role as creative or not, whether they thought CIs were creative, if the reality of CIs matched the their ideas, and their attitude toward their creative working life in general. All participants gave informed consent prior to participating. The survey was anonymous and no identifying information such as name or IP address was gathered. A total of twenty cases of early career workers were constructed. Of those 55 percent identified as female, 40 percent male and 5 percent preferred not to say. Pseudonyms were used, reflecting the stated gender of participants and using typical naming conventions in Ireland today. Participants worked in key areas of Irish CIs including in digital marketing, social media management, entry level administrative work, UX design,

and in studio facilities. While all participants had been engaged in some form of creative work in media industries, not all were currently undertaking such work.

In analyzing the data, a detailed description of the cases was created from all of the qualitative responses to the open-ended survey questions. This data was coded by the authors for recurrent concepts or patterns that were repeated within and across the cases. The interviewers did not take at face value all of the claims made by each participant but rather interpreted those in the round and validated the accuracy of claims through comparison across cases. Codes were clustered together to generate themes, and those themes were analyzed to create an overarching framework of findings. Extracts from the data have been used to represent the larger patterns and themes and are presented as short quotations from specific participants, which represents a theme found across the interviews. The relatively small sample of cases was appropriate for an exploratory study, where the assumption is that findings from a small-scale study are not generalizable, but nonetheless offer insights into real lived experience. Future research should include a larger and more diverse sample and include a comparative analysis with other countries and regions to provide a broader perspective and enhance the generalizability of the study. The aspects of CIs that are particular to the Irish case are its blurring of creative and cultural sectors and its intensely networked nature, both of which speak to the small size of the Irish population and industry. Nonetheless Ireland shares with other European countries a preoccupation with CIs as engines for economic growth and sources of employment, currently characterized by very precarious forms of work. Moreover, across European CIs research there has been a lack of problematization of the idea of the creative in the context of CIs. The Irish case serves to add insight to these latter European-wide challenges.

The relevance of the Irish Case for a global reader are best framed in terms of Massey's (1991) invitation to understand place as not static but processual, as not having boundaries or simple enclosures but as "outward-looking" or "extroverted" (p. 24). Ireland, as a site of CI analysis, is tied to the specifics of the Irish context but also "extroverted" in that some of the key characteristics of CIs in the UK and Western Europe find application in Ireland, perhaps on a smaller scale, and in the same way, while this Irish case study cannot be universalized, it nonetheless becomes relevant to the world beyond because it offers a story or an account of real relationships with creativity and work in a local place, set in a wider international context. The key findings from the case study are outlined in detail below.

Findings and Analysis

The key findings propose that creative workers locate creativity not in their identity and not in their work, but in an abstract "elsewhere" in what we call the ideal of creativity. They value creativity and offer complex and multi-faceted articulations of what creativity means to them. Romantic articulations of creativity are most predominant, followed by individualistic, social and pragmatic conceptualizations (Andersen 2022). However, despite their nuanced articulations and framings of creativity, participants did not identify themselves as inherently creative, and they set

their understandings of creativity apart from their descriptions of their material experiences of work in CIs. Of all the participants who were actively working in CIs, many were very slow to define their day to day work as creative, despite their location within creative industries.

There seems to be a disjuncture between how early career CI workers understand and define creativity in the abstract, and how they experience it in the “concrete” lived realities of creative work. Their lived experiences of creative work were associated with constraints, were quite “ordinary” and were experienced as hard work. However, the paper notes that despite their struggles with work, participants invoked the idea of creativity to find value in roles and they reverted to the concept of the creative to list the rewards derived from their work, which included creative fulfilment and creative recognition. Ultimately participants operationalized specifically *creative* outcomes to articulate their overall satisfaction with their working lives, despite frequently finding their actual work rather uncreative. This implies that the idea of participation in CIs carries an ideological value that overrides the material experiences of this cohort of creative workers. This potentially has implications for how they understand, or fail to understand the political implications of their position. Each of the findings is discussed in detail below.

Work in (Un)Creative Industries

Participants saw CI work as something associated with constraint and standardization. They were very aware of the ordinariness of creative work and its similarity to other, “uncreative” forms of work. Participants frequently emphasized the “hard work” required in creative work. This finding contradicts Siciliano’s empirical account of workers for whom creativity revolved around tasks performed during their working day (2021, 31). Instead, many participants articulated an opposition and tension between work and creative expression. They criticized the lack of creativity in creative industries and in the roles they undertook. Their accounts of creative work often evidenced disappointment with and cynicism about the actual conditions of creative workplaces. Corporatism, bureaucracy and managerialism were the reality of their working lives, echoing research by Banks (2014), Beirne et al. (2017), and Bilton and Leary (2002). Participants reported far less opportunities to practice and demonstrate their creativity than they had envisioned before entering the CIs. Oftentimes, they felt that creativity was underappreciated and undervalued in the workplace and stressed the graft of creative work. Many of the participants found that their romantic ideas of creative work were contradicted by the reality of poor working conditions and pay, burnout and stress and overall frustration with the high expectations and low rewards for working in the CIs.

CI workplaces were reported to be managerial and corporate by participants who saw this as counter to creativity. Like Taylor and Littleton’s (2008) study of artists’ negotiation of art and business, “business” was often taken to be the antithesis of creativity, and there was distrust of the commerciality of CI companies. This was echoed in our findings. Fiona, for example, said “A lot of business leaders still haven’t put

things in place in the workplace to allow creativity. . . Sometimes creativity needs a lack of productivity which scares product managers and business owners.” Gordon said that “there are a lot of stakeholders and red tape in [creative] companies.” Kieran lamented the high levels of administration required of creative workers. Brian saw administration and “corporate demands” as inhibitors of creativity. Profit and commerciality were also held in suspicion and perceived to limit creativity and creative ambitions. Seamus saw “money [as] the biggest priority.” Michael saw creativity and commerciality in a totally antagonistic relationship when he said “Companies in Ireland don’t appreciate when someone is creative nearly enough. They are purely profit driven, leading to low pay and unpaid overtime and toxic workplace environments.” In addition, the commerciality of creative industries was said to stifle creativity. Here marketing, branding and social media work were seen as particularly problematic. For example, Patricia represented this position saying that CIs “want creativity but in the confines of staying true to strict brand guidelines.” Overall, while these participants saw creativity as associated with freedom and individuality, they associated work in CIs with constraints and standardization.

Participants were also very aware of the ordinariness of creative work and its similarity to other forms of work. Keiran said that “at the end of the day it is still a job, and people tend to forget that.” Nora said “[creative work] is still a job and must be taken seriously.” According to Deirdre, “you have to do a lot of nitty gritty work in between short creative periods.” Participants also wanted to correct what they perceived to be a popular narrative of creative work as simply fun and frivolous. Nora said that “it’s not all free-flowing ideas and ‘messing around’.” Ita referred to “long unsociable hours, really hard work and not enough in return for the worker.”

In sum the articulations of what it means to be creative contrasts with participants’ accounts of their experience of “work,” which was seen as connected to constraint and standardization, which was understood as “ordinary” work in many ways, and participants were clear that their working lives were characterized by “hard work.” However the hard work was compensated by a number of positive outcomes that brought participants back to the language of the “creative” to describe the benefits of their work.

(Un)Creative Identities

While scholarship has drawn attention to the lack of creativity in work in CIs and the routine nature of many roles (Ashton 2014; Lee 2012), oftentimes, what is thought to drive new entrants to pursue creative work is their sense of having a creative identity (Alacovska and Kärreman 2023; Taylor and Littleton 2012). While much CI literature proposes that creative work is intrinsically linked to identity, only one participant framed their creativity in that manner when asked to define it. As they put it “It means a lot to me to *be creative*. It acts as a healthy release. It alleviates stress, broadens the mind but at the same time creates something beautiful and original” (Hannah, italics added by authors).

Similarly, in terms of Banks’ (2017) adoption of MacIntyre’s (2007) conceptualization of creativity as being about internal goods, or the joy and satisfaction of creative

work, again very few participants articulated their creativity in those terms. Only a couple of participants linked creativity with inner satisfaction, with Liam saying creativity was about “Being able to create something and be proud of it” and Hannah stating that “(creativity). . .made me happier and more fulfilled than doing what I was 'supposed' to do.” Even fewer participants defined creativity in terms of a career, despite working in the area of CIs “When I found my passion for UX/UI design I found a niche between technology, psychology and design that I could make a career out of” (Gordon). The lack of claims to a creative identity or to “being creative” coupled with the lack of perception of participants’ work as creative begged the question – what is creative about their work? Responses suggested that creativity was paradoxically nowhere and everywhere. Participants did see creativity in positive terms, they located creativity not in themselves but in various activities and practices that formed the routines of their working lives.

Conceptualizing Creativity

Creative workers, rather than feeling disappointed with the lack of intrinsic (identity) and extrinsic (employment) creativity, offered multi-faceted articulations of what creativity meant to them. Here, Anderson’s definitions of creativity are useful in locating participants’ ideal of creativity. Romantic articulations of creativity were most predominant, followed by individualistic, social and pragmatic conceptualizations (Andersen 2022). Moreover, many participants held more than one single ontological position on the phenomenon, and multiplicity was in evidence in their definitions of creativity. For example, participants could simultaneously see creativity as individual but also pragmatic, or as a socio-cultural construct that was also concerned with identity. In other words, creativity was sometimes thought of as an internal quality or central to identity, but oftentimes participants identified it as “out there” or as an external phenomenon that could be exploited and leveraged, rather than something inherent in them. Each of the framings of creativity that arose in the data are outlined below with regard to how they connect with conceptualizations in the literature outlined above.

There was a very strong prevalence of romantic approaches to creativity in evidence amongst participants. This understanding of creativity defined it variously in terms of passion, instinct, feelings, mystery and as “limitless.” This register of key ideas about creativity was reflected clearly by participants who talked about creativity as a passion. “Creativity to me is when somebody uses a magical mix of passion and imagination to make something. . .” (Hannah). As another participant put it “Creativity is. . . channelling your passion into something constructive” (Joanne). Some participants describe creativity not in terms of generating feelings or as an expression of feeling, but as itself a feeling “Creativity itself is being artistic and allowing yourself to be fluid in terms of what you make with the feeling of creativity” (Ita). Several participants used language connected with sublime force to see creativity as something mysterious and wonderful, for example “The force in the universe that pulls everything into existence, the human mind is a conduit to this force under the proper

conditions” (Michael) and somewhat more prosaically, but in a similar vein “Creativity differs for everyone. That’s part of its wonder” (Hannah). This approach was further underpinned by participants who saw creativity as something unbounded and wild. As one participant said “Creativity is the freedom to explore the unknown, to use imagination to its full potential to create something personal and meaningful, without boundaries” (Claire). Or within a similar sensibility “Creativity is a limitless form of expression. There is no one way to be creative or show creativity, it is what we wish to create in the way we wish to create it” (Nora).

Even when participants defined creativity in terms of individual capacity, they tended to see their creativity as operationalized through work or as skills that were properly leveraged through working conditions. Within the individualist tradition, psychologists initially linked creativity to the individual’s capacity for divergent thinking (Guilford 1950) and later to originality or usefulness (Runco and Jaeger 2012). A number of participants named creativity in this way in terms of their “doing” rather than “being” and as a useful skill. “To me, creativity means using my imagination to break away from conventional ideas and ways of doing things” (Joanne). They saw it as a trait that was enabled through the structures of work, “Having flexibility to come up with my own ideas and run with them” (Vinny) and “using an already existing idea but putting your own twist on it” (Liam).

The articulation of creativity as a characteristic of individuals was frequently reduced to a rather uncreative, if not hackneyed, articulation of “thinking outside the box.” Creativity, in these descriptions, was a skill that could be cultivated, rather than an innate talent. As participants variously put it creativity was “Someone who is good at problem solving, design, thinking outside the box” (Gordon) or “I would define creativity as thinking outside the box and using your imagination” (Rachel). This group of responses subscribed to the idea of creativity as connected to the individual, but through a human capital lens in which the individual cultivates creative skills to be mobilized in their employment and career-seeking.

If participants saw creativity in the skills they deployed in work, many also saw creativity materializing through collective work. Here social interactions, rules, and organizations are at the center of articulations of creativity that fit the sociocultural tradition (Csikszentmihalyi 1988). Creativity is understood in this perspective as a shared or distributed process, rather than an internalized trait (John-Steiner 2000; Sawyer and DeZutter 2009). A number of participants subscribed to the idea that creativity was inherently “other” oriented. They proposed that creativity was not unique to particular individuals or contexts but rather omnipresent in people generally “Creativity is for everyone” (Claire). Another participant noted the key role played by the collective in creativity, as she put it

Other people can often nurture new ideas in you, as well as make you feel safe and comfortable enough to explore new things, to let go, to say yes and to just do something new. Also seeing other people’s creative works or outlets can often help you possibly find something that aids your own creativity (Hannah).

Another participant articulated others as key to his creativity “I want to work within a creative team and bounce ideas off other creatives” (Seamus). Participants proposed that the everyday sociality of their work environments or organizations also generated creativity in a way that was shared and distributed beyond just the individual. As one participant put it “I could sit in a room with the creative people in my job and I would be blown out of the water with the innovations and designs they would come up with” (Tina). For these creative workers their understanding of creativity was that it was social, they saw that group contexts, organizational practices and the collaboration of groups of individuals in the process were inherent and vitally important to creative outcomes.

In addition to the romantic, individualistic and social conceptualizations of creativity that were in evidence amongst participants there were also a number of participants who subscribed to a pragmatic approach to creativity. This tradition emphasizes the idea of constraint as central to understanding how creativity is limited or facilitated (Andersen 2022, 19). In this articulation of creativity there was an obvious practical or “application” approach to creativity. One participant described her creativity as “Purposefully practising art within actions” (Olivia) and another said “To me I think creativity is how you approach a problem and how you fix it, how you come up with ideas to best suit your plan” (Tina). A third participant noted that he enjoyed “the practical side” of creativity (Vinny). This grouping of participants saw creativity as an ability to generate in ways that were “useful.” They proposed that creativity was not so much an identity but a pragmatic activity. As one put it “Using any sort of skill set to create a unique idea or use an already existing idea but putting your own twist on it” (Liam). For these participants, creativity was procedural and enabled by clear organizational or project parameters. As one participant put it “Where I work, I have to follow many rules. Although filming, and creating media content is creative work, there is a strict rulebook I must follow” (Nora).

Creative Outcomes

Despite the narratives of difficulty and struggle with work, which contrasted with the ideal-type descriptions of creativity that participants operationalized, early career workers reverted to the idea of “creativity” to articulate the benefits of their work. In that regard they valued creativity as an outcome of their work, they described the benefit to them of creative “fulfilment” and they attached importance to creative recognition. They operationalized the idea of specifically *creative* benefits to articulate their overall satisfaction with their working lives, despite the difficulties they encountered with the actual work, as noted earlier.

For some participants, they were rewarded for their work by an outcome that they described as “creative.” Deirdre, for example, said that her success was achieved through having “your creative ideas seen through and become realized.” Fiona said that she enjoyed “being able to use my skills and knowledge to create various kinds of media content.” For others their status as “creative” was how they valued their work. Gordon said that his creative role was his “passion” and he was “very proud” to have

a creative role. For others, their sense of success was achieved through being recognized and acknowledged by others as creative. Patricia, for example, said that she defined “success in creative industries as having your work recognized and seen as innovative and unique.” Extrinsic benefit in the form of recognition was also apparent in Fiona’s definition of creative success “It’s about the impact of the creative input.” Deirdre felt positive about her career through other people, her colleagues “they value what I can add to our company with my creativity.” Nora felt successful when “creating something that catches the eye.”

These responses suggest that creativity, for some, was closely tied to external validation of creative success rather than being a key characteristic of how they defined their actual working practices and everyday reality. Self-fulfilment in the everyday practice of their work was only mentioned by one participant as the key indicator of a successful working life. Tina articulated her success as “waking up and feeling fulfilled in what you are doing. Enjoying going to work and being excited for your next project, I think that tops everything.” Participants narratives of success were articulated in specifically creative terms, despite the fact that they worked in an industry where they often saw the work itself as “uncreative.”

In sum, participants clearly valued creativity and offered complex and nuanced articulations of what creativity meant to them. These articulations corresponded with what the literature has named as romantic, individualistic, social and pragmatic understandings of creativity. Only to a very limited extent did participants name creativity as primarily a dimension of their careers or work. For the most part participants set their understandings of creativity apart from their descriptions of their experiences of work in CIs. Participants were very slow to define their work as creative, despite their location within creative industries. Work was often perceived to interfere with, or stifle, creativity and participants often felt that their creativity flourished despite rather than because of their work in CIs. Their sense of individuality, autonomy and freedom of expression, which defined their creativity in the abstract, existed separately from their view of the “un-creativity” of the actual work they were doing in CIs.

Discussion and Conclusion

While many CIs scholars have examined creative work and its problematic conditions and outcomes, relatively few of those studies take as their central problematic how creativity itself should be defined. Our findings resonate with the research of others, whereby young people are, at times disillusioned with the realities of creative work’s precarity and with the hierarchical, managerial and conservative rather than creative and democratic nature of the industry (Taylor & Luckman 2020; Wong and Chow 2020). In their study of aspiring creative workers, Morgan and Nelligan (2018) found that “most aspirants. . . eventually reached a sobering realization that [pursuing a creative career] involves abandoning the sacred and ethical roots of creativity” (p. 13). In these and other studies, the realities for young creative workers are that being a “worker” and being “creative” did not always harmonize (Duffy 2016; Oakley 2009). Equally, scholarship on CIs work has found that new entrants and

early career workers are disillusioned with the corporate nature of much CIs work. Our participants' experiences of work were linked with constraint, with "ordinary" work, and with hard work, but none of these ideas arose when asked how they thought about creativity. This finding mirrors research from Blair (2001), Taylor and Littleton (2008), and Gill (2011) who find that when thinking about "creativity" on the one hand and "industries," on the other hand, the latter was often taken to be the antithesis of creativity, with workers professing distrust of the commerciality of CIs. Our study similarly echoes research by Banks (2014) and Beirne et al. (2017) who find corporatism, bureaucracy and managerialism were the reality of "creative" working lives. Many of these studies highlight the policy interventions required to address the need for greater supports and improved working conditions for early career workers. But this study also highlights the challenge to such interventions, which need to be informed by how early career workers understand their working and creative lives, as outlined in this study.

Creativity as participants imagined it was not evidenced in the everyday practice of their work, and yet participants still reverted to a positive narrative regarding the benefits of their working lives. Recognition and acknowledgment were closely connected to the idea of the "creative," a finding that resonates with work by McRobbie (1998, 2002) and Duffy and Wissinger (2017). Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) similarly note that "Even relatively unsuccessful workers confess to the appeal of this potential influence and recognition" which is evident in the way some of our participants saw recognition as important to their sense of creative success (p. 102).

However, our research departs from scholarship that suggests that young people's investment in CIs and their sense of "being creative" overrides their sense of fairness in creative work and the poor conditions they often experience (McRobbie 2016). Our findings suggest that young people were very conscious of the ordinariness of creative work and understood and experienced it as hard work. They made no claims to a creative identity and did not articulate a tension between art and commerce. Instead, they were more conscious to locate creativity in everyday routine work and find pleasure and rewards in this. Although somewhat disdainful of the corporate nature of the work, they nonetheless experienced job satisfaction that was, in part at least, related to their ideal of the creative.

These findings underpin and confirm current knowledge about creative work, but they also add new insights in a few ways. The study constitutes an empirical application of typologies of creativity (Andersen 2022; Siciliano 2021), which are not exhaustively evident in CIs research. In that regard this study helps to empirically unpack how creative workers conceptualize their creativity. While they may be understood as passionately committed creators, the reality of how they describe their creativity within their work differs significantly. The study therefore also sets out how creativity is connected, or not, to experiences of work for a group of early career workers. They locate creativity not in their identity and not in their day-to-day material experiences of work, but in an abstract "elsewhere" in what we call the ideal of creativity. Finally, the study shows that despite the contrasts in how participants described creativity and how they described their actual work, ultimately and interestingly, they revert to the

idea of specifically creative rewards such as creative fulfilment and creative recognition when describing the positive outcomes of their work. These findings show that the idea of working in CIs carries political implications because CI work holds an ideological value that prevails over material experiences for this cohort of creative workers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Anne O' Brien  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2306-1415>

References

- Alacovska, Ana, and Dan Kärreman. 2023. "Tormented Selves: The Social Imaginary of the Tortured Artist and the Identity Work of Creative Workers." *Organization Studies* 44 (6): 961–85.
- Amabile, Teresa M. 1983. *The Social Psychology of Creativity*. New York: Springer.
- Anderesen, Mars Møller T. 2022. *Researching Creativity in Media Industries*. Maryland and London: Lexington Books.
- Arnold, Sarah and O'Brien, Anne. 2023. "'I'm so lucky': narratives of struggle, unfairness and luck in among new entrants to the Irish media industries." *Creative Industries Journal* 18 (1): 25–42.
- Ashton, Daniel. 2014. "Making Media Workers: Contesting Film and Television Career Pathways." *Television & New Media* 16 (3): 275–94.
- Banks, Mark. 2007. *The Politics of Cultural Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Banks, Mark. 2014. "Craft Labour and Creative Industries." In *Creativity and Cultural Policy*, edited by Bilton Chris, 75–91. London and New York: Routledge.
- Banks, Mark. 2017. *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield International.
- Banks, Mark, Rosalind Gill, and Stephanie Taylor. 2013. *Theorizing Cultural Work: Labour, Continuity and Change in the Cultural and Creative Industries*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Beirne, Martin, Matt Jennings, and Stephanie Knight. 2017. "Autonomy and Resilience in Cultural Work: Looking Beyond the 'Creative Industries.'" *Journal for Cultural Research* 21 (2): 204–21.
- Berg, Bruce L. 2004. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Bilton, Chris, and Ruth Leary. 2002. "What Can Managers Do for Creativity? Brokering Creativity in the Creative Industries." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 8 (1): 49–64.

- Bilton, Chris, Doris Ruth Eikhof and Charlotte Gilmore. 2021. "Balancing Act: Motivation and Creative Work in the Lived Experience of Writers and Musicians." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 27 (6): 738–52.
- Blair, Helen. 2001. "You're Only as Good as Your Last Job': The Labour Process and Labour Market in the British Film Industry." *Work Employment & Society* 15 (1): 149–69.
- Creative Ireland. 2018, 2023. "The Creative Ireland Programme 2018-22, 2023-27." <https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie>
- Creswell, John W. 2014. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. London: Sage.
- Crowley, Frank. 2017. "Irish Policymakers Must Focus More on the Creative Sector." RTÉ Online. <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2017/1121/921676-irish-policymakers-must-focus-more-on-the-creative-sector/>
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1988. "Motivation and Creativity: Toward a Synthesis of Structural and Energistic Approaches to Cognition." *New Ideas in Psychology* 6 (2): 159–76.
- Cultural and Creative Skillnet. 2024. "What We Do." <https://www.creativeskillnet.ie>
- Department of An Taoiseach. 2008. *Building Ireland's Smart Economy*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. 2016. "Culture 2025 a Framework Policy to 2025." https://web.archive.org/web/20170424204256/http://www.ahrrga.gov.ie/app/uploads/2016/07/culture_2025_framework_policy_document.pdf
- Duffy, Brooke Erin. 2016. "The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour in the Digital Culture Industries." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19 (4): 441–57.
- Duffy, Brooke Erin, and Elizabeth Wissinger. 2017. "Mythologies of Creative Work in the Social Media Age: Fun, Free, and 'Just Being Me.'" *Journal of International Communication* 11: 20.
- Gielen, Pascal. 2013. *Creativity and Other Fundamentalisms*. Amsterdam and Heyningen: Ram Publications.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2011. "Life is a Pitch': Managing the Self in New Media Work." In *Managing Media Work*, edited by Mark Deuze, 249–62. California, London, New Delhi and Singapore: Sage.
- Guilford, JP. 1950. "Creativity." *American Psychologist* 5 (9): 444–54.
- Hesmondhalgh, David, and Sarah Baker. 2011. *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*. London: Routledge.
- Houses of the Oireachtas. 2017. "Cultural Policy Dáil Éireann Debate." 31 January. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2017-01-31/401/>
- John-Steiner, Vera. 2000. *Creative Collaboration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, David. 2012. "The Ethics of Insecurity: Risk, Individualization and Value in British Independent Television Production." *Television & New Media* 13 (6): 480–97.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2007. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Massey, Doreen. 1991. "A Global Sense of Place." *Marxism Today* 38: 24–9.
- McRobbie, Angela. 1998. *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* London: Routledge.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2002. "Clubs to Companies: Notes on the Decline of Political Culture in Speeded Up Creative Worlds." *Cultural Studies* 16 (4): 516–31.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2016. *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity.

- Morgan, George, and Pariece Nelligan. 2018. *The Creativity Hoax: Precarious Work in the Gig Economy*. London, New York, Melbourne, Delhi: Anthem Press.
- Oakley, Kate. 2009. "From Bohemia to Britart—Art Students Over 50 Years." *Cultural Trends* 18 (4): 281–94.
- O'Brien, Anne, Sarah Arnold, and Páraic Kerrigan. 2021. *Media Graduates at Work: Irish Narratives on Policy, Education and Industry*. London: Palgrave.
- Runco, Mark A., and Garrett Jaeger. 2012. "The Standard Definition of Creativity." *Creativity Research Journal* 24 (1): 1–96.
- Sawyer, R. Keith, and Stacy DeZutter. 2009. "Distributed Creativity: How Collective Creations Emerge From Collaboration." *Psychology of Aesthetics Creativity and the Arts* 3 (2): 81–92.
- Siciliano, Michael L. 2021. *Creative Control*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Taylor, Stephanie. 2023. "Creativity: Celebrations and Tensions. Social and Personality." *Psychology Compass* 17 (4): 1–10. doi:10.1111/spc3.12737
- Taylor, Stephanie, and Karen Littleton. 2008. "Art Work or Money: Conflicts in the Construction of a Creative Identity." *Sociological Review* 56 (2): 275–92.
- Taylor, Stephanie, and Karen Littleton. 2012. *Contemporary Identities of Creativity and Creative Work*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Taylor, Stephanie, and Susan Luckman. 2020. "Creative Aspiration and the Betrayal of Promise? The Experience of New Creative Workers." In *Pathways Into Creative Working Lives*, edited by Taylor Stephanie & Susan Luckman, 1–27. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wong, Yvette Lok Yee, and Yiu Fai Chow. 2020. "No Longer Aspirational: A Case Study of Young Creative Workers in Hong Kong Who Quit." *Global Media and China* 5 (4): 438–51.
- Yin, Robert K. 2014. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. London: Sage.

Author Biographies

Anne O' Brien is Associate Professor of Media Studies at Maynooth University. She has published articles on women workers in creative industries in *Media Culture and Society*, *Journalism*, *Gender, Work and Organisation* and the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. Her 2019 book explores *Women, Inequality and Media Work* (Routledge), other publications include *Media Graduates at Work* (Sarah Arnold and Páraic Kerrigan, Palgrave, 2021) and a co-edited collection *Media Work, Mothers and Motherhood* (Routledge, 2021).

Sarah Arnold is Associate Professor of Media Studies at Maynooth University. She is author of *Gender & Early Television* (Bloomsbury, 2021) and co-author of *Media Graduates at Work* (Palgrave, 2021 with Anne O'Brien and Páraic Kerrigan) and has contributed to journals including *Feminist Media Studies*; *Women's History Review*; *Cultural Trends*; and *Media, Culture & Society*.